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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 001622

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BELGIAN GOVERNMENT TO SUPPORT NEW APPROACH ON
AFGHANISTAN

REF: STATE 122731

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Belgian government is prepared to welcome the new administration policy on Afghanistan. The Minister of Defense will speak publicly in support of the President's speech. The new Foreign Minister was unable to provide an immediate reaction but agreed there are strong arguments in favor of sharing burdens. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Defense Minister Pieter De Crem told the Ambassador, A/DCM and DATT on December 1 that he will speak publicly on December 2 in support of President Obama's new approach. He had already discussed Afghanistan with Prime Minister Yves Leterme earlier that morning. In his message, De Crem will call upon all the nations deploying forces to Afghanistan to increase their support, both on the military and the civilian sides.

13. (C) De Crem said that Belgium was already increasing its military presence in Afghanistan but admitted that Belgium needed to do more on the civilian side. He said Prime Minister Annemie Turtelboom over sending civilian police trainers but the police trade unions were resisting. However, De Crem stressed, "I do not exclude anything, although we already have considerable participation."

14. (C) De Crem believes it is very important to use the opportunity of the President's address. He said he will be very supportive and will push both the PM and the FM both to be very supportive and to push for what is needed for the longer term. However, for domestic political reasons, Belgium will need to keep in place its caveat on military operations in the south. De Crem's aim is to create an atmosphere where the government considers doing more in the near term, and increases civilian aid and police training.

15. (C) The Prime Minister, under De Crem's urging, had agreed to meet with Turtelboom and Deputy Prime Minister Guy Vanhengel (both of the Flemish liberal party), on the police training issue but the PM had had to postpone that meeting in order to have more time to lay the groundwork for successful discussions. (NOTE: The Flemish liberals dominated a previous government and had excluded the Flemish Christian Democrats when they were in power. The Flemish liberals are now chafing at similar treatment by the now-dominant Flemish Christian Democrats, the party of the PM, FM and DefMin.. END NOTE).

16. (C) De Crem then pointed out for the Ambassador others in the opposition to the government with whom the Ambassador should meet. The Ambassador agreed to do so.

17. (C) Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere, in his post less than a week, made clear he would be unable to comment at this point, but would be coordinating his position within the government and with advice from his ministry. He was interested in whether the President would be announcing a timetable.

18. (C) BIO NOTE: Vanackere speaks excellent English and has a good sense of humor. He noted that he is "less immediate than (his predecessor) Leterme. He described himself as a Parliamentarian politician, with a view that if he shows respect to the opposition, they will better respect him. He was pleased that his party, the Flemish Christian Democrats, had kept the Foreign Ministry portfolio as he believed that it was important for the party to do so.

GUTMAN

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